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GEORGE LIELE AND ANDREW BRYAN, PIONEER NEGRO BAPTIST PREACHERS

Without any consideration of the merits or demerits of what is called the exceptional man theory, perhaps no two men stand out more prominently in the early history of the Negro church than George Liele and Andrew Bryan. In the days of darkest forebodings and of the greatest human sufferings these two pioneers of religion went forth to disseminate ideas and mold sentiments which were to shape the inner springs of conduct of their fellow-slaves. Sketches of these heroes must claim the attention of seekers for the truth as to this important phase of our history.

A letter dated September 15, 1790, from the late Reverend Mr. Joseph Cook of Euhaw, upper Indian Land, South Carolina, says: "A poor Negro, commonly called, among his friends, Brother George,¹ has been so highly favored of God, as to plant the first Baptist Church in Savannah, and another in Jamaica." This man was George Liele. He was born in Virginia about 1751. He knew very little of his mother, Nancy, but was informed by white and black that his father was a very devout man. The family moved much during the youth of George, but finally settled in Georgia.

As a youth George Liele had a natural fear of God, holding constantly in mind His condemnation of sin. Liele was converted through the preaching of the Reverend Matthew Moore,³ who later baptized him. Desiring then to prove the sense of his obligations to God, Liele began to instruct his own people. Crude but firm in purpose, he soon showed

¹ He was sometimes called George Sharp.—See Benedict, *History of the Baptists*, etc., p. 189.

² The facts of this article for the most part are taken from letters written about the work of Liele and Bryan and from correspondence concerning them published in London in the *Baptist Annual Register*.

³ Mr. Moore was an ordained Baptist minister, of Brooke County, Georgia.

ministerial gifts and after a trial sermon before a quarterly meeting of white ministers was licensed as a local preacher. He practiced preaching on different plantations, and in the church to which he belonged, on evenings when there was no regular service. After a short period he began his regular ministerial work, serving about three years at Brunton Land, and at Yamacraw, where developed a number of useful communicants.⁴

Among these early members of the Yamacraw church were Reverend David George, who later labored, with permission from the Governor, in the ministry at Nova Scotia, with sixty communicants, white and black; Reverend Amos, who preached with good results at New Providence, one of the Bahama Islands, to about three hundred members; and Reverend Jesse Gaulsing, who preached near Augusta, in South Carolina to sixty members. Preaching later from Chapter III Saint John, and the clause of verse 7, "Ye must be born again," George Liele moved to repentance a more useful man, Andrew Bryan, and a noted woman named Hagar.^{4a} After Liele organized this influential church at Yamacraw, then a suburb of Savannah, Mr. Henry Sharp, his master, encouraged this pioneer by giving him his freedom.

Mr. Sharp was an officer in the war and died from wounds received in the King's service.⁵ Soon after the death of Mr. Sharp there arose those who were dissatisfied with George's liberation. He was taken and thrown into prison, but by producing his manumission papers was released. To extricate himself from this unpleasant situation Liele became obligated to a Colonel Kirkland. At the evacuation of Savannah by the British he was partly obliged to come to Jamaica, as an indentured servant for money he owed Colonel Kirkland, who promised to be his friend in that country. Upon landing at Kingston he was upon the recommendation

⁴ THE JOURNAL OF NEGRO HISTORY, I, p. 71.

^{4a} Under the influence of his preaching Liele's wife was converted and baptized at Brunton Land.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 336.

of the Colonel to General Campbell, the Governor of Jamaica, employed by him two years, and, on leaving the island, the governor gave Liele a certificate of his good behavior. As soon as Liele had paid his debt to Colonel Kirkland, he obtained for himself and family a certificate of freedom from the vestry and governor, according to the law of this Island.⁶ Thus by force of circumstances George Liele was compelled to leave those among whom he had labored so effectively and thrown into another field where he had opportunity for further service.

Liele's work in Jamaica began in September, 1784. He started in Kingston by preaching in a private house to a small congregation. Next, he organized a church with four other men who had come from America. His message had a telling effect especially on the slaves. The effectiveness of his work is also seen from the fact that persecutions at baptisms and meetings which were, at first, frequent, later became a less serious hindrance. Upon frequent petitions, however, the Jamaica Assembly finally granted free worship of God to all those desiring it. So successfully did Liele work that in a short while he had in the country together with well wishers and followers about fifteen hundred communicants, to whom he preached twice on each Sunday, in the morning and afternoon, and twice in the week.⁷

The work of the church was extended by a few deacons and elders, and by teachers of small congregations in the town and country. Thomas Nichols Swigle became Liele's chief assistant. His particular work was to regulate church matters, serve as deacon, and also to teach a free school opened for the instruction of free and slave children. The work continued to spread through Swigle, who became a minister after the order of Liele. He said: "About two months ago, I paid my first visit to a part of our church held at Clinton Mount, Coffee Plantation, in the Parish of

⁶ *The Baptist Annual Register*, 1790-93, p. 334.

⁷ *The Journal of Negro History*, I, pp. 71-72.

Saint Andrew, about sixteen miles distance from Kingston, in the High mountains, where we have a chapel and 254 brethren." About his work in general he said: "I preach, baptize, marry, attend funerals, and go through every work of the ministry without fee or reward."⁸

It was soon evident that there must be some definite place of worship. To this end a piece of land about three acres at the east end of Kingston was purchased for the sum of about 155 pounds and on it a church building fifty-seven by thirty-seven feet was begun. Because the congregation was poor and gifts were small, Liele had a struggle to complete his building. He interested in his cause several gentlemen of influence, among whom was a Mr. Stephen Cooke, a member of the Assembly, who in turn asked help of friends in England. By January 12, 1793, he was able to say that not only was the Kingston church completed but that in Spanish Town also he had purchased land for a cemetery with a house on it which served as a church building. The Kingston church, the first of its kind in Jamaica, under the leadership of Liele had twelve trustees, all of whom were members of the congregation, whose names were specified in the title recorded in the office of the secretary of the island.⁹

While establishing the churches at Savannah and at Jamaica, Liele received nothing for his services. He was on a mission and without charge preached, baptized, administered the Lord's Supper, and travelled from one place to another to settle church affairs. He did this so as not to be misunderstood and not to hinder the progress of the church of Christ. Mr. Stephen Cooke, in giving his opinion of Liele, said that he was "a very industrious man, decent and humble in his manners, and, I think, a good man." His family life was pleasant. He had a wife and four children, three boys and a girl. Liele followed farming for a regular occupation, but because of the uncertain seasons in Jamaica, kept horses and wagons for employment in local transportation for the government by contract. He was

⁸ *The Journal of Negro History*, I, p. 72.

⁹ *The Baptist Annual Register*, 1790-1793, p. 335.

business-like and kept the good will of the public. Although busy, Liele found time to read some of the good books which he had in his meager collection and also to write letters explaining the growth of his work in Jamaica and inquiring after the progress of the church at Savannah, then pastored by Andrew Bryan.¹⁰

In building up the membership of his churches Liele showed great tact. Unlike the Methodists who were rapidly coming forward at this time, he would not receive any slaves who had not permission of their owners. This not only increased the membership of the church but it made friends for their cause among the masters and overseers. So careful was Liele to get the confidence of the masters and overseers that he ordered a bell for his church just a mile and a half out of Spanish Town in Jamaica, not particularly to give warning to the slaves about the time of meeting, but to the owners of slaves that they might know the time when their slaves should return to the plantations. The church covenant, a collection of certain passages of Scripture, which was used once a month, was shown to members of the legislature, the magistrates and justices to secure their approval that they might give their slaves permission to become members of the congregation.¹¹

The effect of the work of Liele is well narrated in a statement of an overseer who sat at breakfast with Swigle at Clinton Mount, sixteen miles from Kingston. He said that he did not need an assistant nor did he make use of the whip, for whether he was at home or away, everything was conducted as it should have been. The slaves were industrious, with a plenty of provision in their ground and a plenty of live stock in their barns; and they, one and all, lived together in unity, brotherly love and peace. With a mission to serve, this man then made his way into the hearts of his fellows.

Andrew Bryan, the other pioneer, was born in 1737 at Goose Creek, South Carolina, about sixteen miles from Charleston. His mother was a slave and died in the service

¹⁰ Benedict, *History of the Baptists*, p. 189.

¹¹ *The Baptist Annual Register*, 1798-1801, p. 368.

of her master. His father, also a slave, became infirm with years, dying at the age of one hundred and five. Andrew became converted under the preaching of George Liele when the latter served the church in Savannah. Bryan married a woman named Hannah about nine years after his conversion. His wife remained a slave in the service of Jonathan Bryan for a long time after her marriage, but was finally purchased by her husband.¹²

Andrew Bryan began to preach to congregations of black and a few white people at Savannah just eight or nine months after Liele's departure for Jamaica. Edward Davis encouraged Bryan and his followers to erect a building on his land in Yamacraw for a place of worship, of which they were later artfully dispossessed. In the beginning of their worship, frequent interruptions came from the whites. It was at a time when many Negro slaves had absconded, and some had been taken away by the British. This was an excuse for the wickedness of the whites, who then became more cruel in whipping and imprisoning the worshipers, undertaking to justify their action before the magistrates. When George Liele was preaching in and near Savannah, he did not suffer from such molestation, because the British then ruled the country, but Andrew Bryan began his work under different conditions about the time when Georgia became independent.

For refusing to discontinue his work Andrew Bryan was twice imprisoned. Sampson, his brother, who was converted about one year after Andrew was, remained with him, however, in all of his hard trials. On one occasion about fifty slaves were severely whipped. Among these was Andrew, who was cut and bled abundantly. While he was yet under their lashes, Hambleton says he rejoiced, not only to be scourged but would freely suffer death for the cause of Jesus Christ. Jonathan Bryan, their kind master, was much affected and grieved over their punishment and interceded for them. George Walton said "that such treatment would be condemned even among barbarians."

¹² *The Baptist Annual Register*, 1798-1801, p. 366.

They were brought before chief justices Henry Osborne, James Habersham and David Montague, who released them. Chief Justice Osborne then gave them liberty to continue their worship "between sunrising and sun set."¹⁴ Their master told the magistrate that he would give them the liberty of his own house or barn, at a place called Brampton, about three miles from town, and that they should not be interrupted in their worship. They accepted the offer of Jonathan Bryan and worshipped with little or no interruption at Brampton for about two years. Many slaves thereafter attended the services held in the barn at Brampton.

White preachers often visited his congregation. Lorenzo Dow, perhaps the foremost white itinerant preacher of his time, on one occasion preached to Bryan's congregation, while he was imprisoned, feeling that in their hour of trial these Negroes especially needed his encouragement. The whites to whom Dow preached offered him money, but he did not take it as he did not wish the wrong construction put upon his efforts nor to be deemed an impostor. As he was once leaving Savannah, however, after he had been entertained largely by Negroes, Andrew Bryan met him and, on shaking hands, gave him eleven and a half dollars which the Negroes presented him as a donation. By these visits of Dow and other preachers, Bryan and his followers were greatly helped.¹⁵ Among others who visited Bryan's church were Abraham Marshall and Thomas Burton who examined and baptized about sixty in this connection.

Reverend Mr. Marshall gave this congregation over his signature two important certificates which follow:

This is to certify that upon examination into the experiences and characters of a number of Ethiopians, and adjacent to Savannah, it appears that God has brought them out of darkness into the light of the Gospel, and given them fellowship one with the other; believing it is the will of Christ, we have constituted them a church of Jesus Christ.

¹³ Dow, *History of the Cosmopolite*, p. 124.

¹⁴ *The Baptist Annual Register*, 1790-1793, p. 339.

¹⁵ Dow, *Experience and Travels*, p. 125.

On January 19, 1788, he sent Bryan the following:

This is to certify, that the Ethiopian church of Jesus Christ at Savannah, have called their beloved Andrew to the work of the ministry. We have examined into his qualifications, and believing it to be the will of the great head of the church, we have appointed him to preach the Gospel, and to administer the ordinances, as God in his providence may call.¹⁶

Out of the midst then of great persecutions Andrew Bryan became the official head of an established church.

The death of Jonathan Bryan, the master of Andrew Bryan, marked an epoch in the useful career of this pioneer preacher. By consent of the parties concerned, he purchased his freedom for the sum of fifty pounds. He then bought a lot in Yamacraw and built on it a residence near the rough building Sampson Bryan had built some time before. When the Bryan estate was finally divided, the lot on which Sampson had been permitted to build became the property of an attorney, who married a daughter of the deceased Mr. Bryan and received 12 pounds a year for it. In these readjustments there were no serious interruptions to the worship of Andrew Bryan's congregation. The seven hundred members worshiped not only without molestation, but in the presence, and with the approbation and encouragement of many of the white people.¹⁷

With this large membership Bryan needed but did not have a regular assistant. In his absence his brother Sampson preached for him. Bryan's plan was to divide his church when the membership became too large for him to serve it efficiently. This finally had to be done. This branch of the church was organized as the Second African Baptist Church of Savannah with Henry Francis, a slave of Colonel Leroy Hammond, as pastor. Francis showed such remarkable ability that some white men, who considered him unusual, purchased his freedom that he might devote all of his time to his chosen work. Not many years

¹⁶ *The Baptist Annual Register*, 1790-1793, p. 340.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1798-1800, p. 367.

thereafter Bryan's church again reached the stage of having an unwieldy number and it was further divided by organizing in another part of the city the Third African Baptist Church.

Bryan exercised the greatest of care in his public and private obligations and manifested much interest in his family. In 1800 he wrote Dr. Rippon: "With much pleasure, I inform you, dear Sir, that I enjoy good health, and am strong in body, at the age of sixty-three years, and am blessed with a pious wife, whose freedom I have obtained, and an only daughter and child who is married to a free man, tho' she, and consequently under our laws, her seven children, five sons and two daughters, are slaves. By a kind Providence I am well provided for, as to worldly comforts, (tho' I have had very little given me as a minister) having a house and lot in this city, besides the land on which several buildings stand, for which I receive a small rent, and a fifty-six acre tract of land, with all necessary buildings, four miles in the country, and eight slaves; for whose education and happiness, I am enabled thro' mercy to provide."¹⁸

His church became in the course of time the beacon light in the Negro religious life of Georgia. From this center went other workers into the inviting fields of that State, until the Negro preacher became circumscribed during the thirties and forties by laws intended to prevent such disturbances as were caused by Nat Turner in starting an insurrection in Virginia. Andrew Bryan, however, did not live to see this. He passed away in 1812, respected by all who knew him and loved by his numerous followers.¹⁹ He was succeeded by his nephew, Andrew Marshall, who served that church so long that former slaves still living have a recollection of his work among these people. In keeping with its loyalty to its ministers, this congregation boasts even today that in its long history it has had only a few ministers to serve it.

JOHN W. DAVIS.

¹⁸ *The Baptist Annual Register*, 1798-1801, p. 368. *Ibid.*, 1790-1793, p. 339.

¹⁹ Benedict, *History of the Baptists*, pp. 790-791.